

DEATH-WORSHIP IN NEW YORK

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PART ONE: FIRSTBORN OF DEATH

PROLOGUE - A WORSHIPER OF THE IMAGE

She arrived, at last, two weeks after I had sent for her, during which interval I had prepared feverishly for her coming. The gifts I had bought for her were not extravagant—artificial flowers, little chocolates, imitation perfume, candles of all colors—but she knew, I was sure, that the parsimony of my means disclosed, in this way, an embarrassment of devotion, a degree of undisguised adoration of which rich men cannot be capable. From dusty Mexico City to the verdant hills of Upstate New York—it was awful to think of the hands she had passed through. Hardly knowing what she made of my language, I declared her beautiful in breathless tones and I took her in my arms for the first time—the lightness of her no less astonishing than her undreamt-of corporeality. She grinned ceaselessly up at me, and her grin was broad and flawless, and of such fierce and luminous tranquility as no flesh-bearing face could portray. Kissing her mouth seemed not just irreverent, but impracticable—for what was there to kiss? My new career of kissing began instead with my lips pressed to her tiny marmoreal brow. Dabbing her tenderly with the wetted tip of a clean rag, I called her by the names I had learned: *La Flaca*, *La Bonita*, *La*

Huesuda, La Niña Blanca, and carrying her to the place I had prepared myself, I set her scythe in the loop of her right hand, and her golden scales in the loop of her left, and I lit her candles, and knelt rapturously there for several silent minutes before pouring a glass of tequila. The tequila, despite being the liquor prescribed as the Saint's particular preference, would not last. Its effects on me were too different from those of whiskey, which was *my* drink, and the libation to which I would in the coming weeks revert—both in the course of my own habits, and in the attendance of my newly adopted devotions as a self-confirmed Santa Muertisto. Unlike whiskey, tequila had a fiery effervescence that went directly to the top of my head, making it feel like a breeze-cast balloon filled with helium and tropical spices. More appropriate to my troglodytic character, whiskey worked in the opposite direction, seeping down into my chest cavity and reviving that little black furnace in my bowels by which all my heavy, creaking mechanisms received their animation. It was the first of many little exceptions, modifications, and reductions that I would begin making to the established and recommended rituals surrounding the veneration of Santa Muerte, almost as soon as her altar had been completed with the arrival of the image—that is, the statue—itself. Love, however true and transcendent it may be, can transform a man only so much. Witness Constantine, or Augustine, even Paul himself. Mine was the revelatory love of an instant convert, a man to whom salvation seemed already overdue and therefore inevitably imperfect; but also a man who was near to attaining his thirtieth year, and for whom, therefore, both love and conversion could only have been made possible by an awkward operation of the will. Unlike the typical convert

to the cult of the skinless Lady, I had received no miracles, and expected none from my devotions; at least I told myself as much. Standing before the flimsy, black-walled hovel I had constructed to house the image, I felt more than anything that I had found the way to claim Death formally, just as I had always known myself to have been claimed by her: that I could now keep Death fixed in my vision, however long she withheld her hand from me. *You maddening coquette!* I could not restrain myself from thinking to the statue, *You may deny me, you may evade me, but I will not let you forget me.*

Conversion is never anything more or less than abrupt and joyful recognition of the already-known, like coming to oneself in the middle of the supermarket and realizing without the aid of any traceable connective principle that you had come there for evaporated milk—but that, on top of this, your wife adores sherbet, and you adore your wife. It is, I mean to say, never alien, but always a blunt but blinding annunciation of the stupendously familiar. That's why conversion is easy, though the remembrance of it is not. It has all the markings of a culmination, while nevertheless pointing abysmally out into the future, delivering a white flash of unexpected and deceptively redemptive reality while expecting a lifetime of labors in the name of that which is always inevitably assumed without being consciously self-chosen. That flash of reality which one receives is one's own and no one else's: the world may concur with one on every quirk and quibble, and yet the world's belief is mere shuffling rote and vacant salutation, while one's own is *truth*, incredible in its obviousness.

So it was when, picking through Wikipedia pages in search of something else on one of the last nights of August, 2011, I first learned of the existence of the Santa Muerte phenomenon in Mexico, and knew in an instant that the religion I had sought since the day my faith was lost had, in this mundane way, found me. Or rather, that I had discovered without seeking that which I had forgotten I was always looking for. The dawn had not come before I had purchased Online a statue around which I could enact my intended devotions—a white robed skeleton standing upon a blue and green globe, with an implement for reaping in one hand and one for weighing in the other. Let it not be believed, however, that I was without reservations. Beside that which fascinated me about the cult of Holy Death, there was much that, even in the first days of my eager researches, seemed to my Protestant instincts excessive, impertinent, and profane. From the beginning, my impulsive dedication to the Bony Lady was defined by that variety of inescapable paradox for which all true religion must allow, and without which Reason could never be supplanted by Faith. I understood immediately that I could not come to Santa Muerte as a Mexican living in the barrios of Tijuana could. I possessed neither the Catholic sensibility for the veneration of saints and blessed objects, nor the continuous propinquity to death enjoyed by those whose world is dominated by drug-lords and kidnappers, and whose yearly rituals include the graveyard celebrations of *el Dio de Los Muertes*. Nothing could have been more antithetical to the charismatic but unadorned evangelical Christianity of my youth than the combination of pseudo-magical idolatry and indigenous supernaturalism of Santa Muerte and its popish antecedents. As a much younger man, I doubtless

would have found these exotic trappings all the more scintillating and attractive; at twenty-nine they seemed only the unavoidable formalities attached to a tradition whose essence resonated with my deepest being, but whose practical peculiarities lay still beyond my capacities to rationally incorporate. If I loved these things at first, it was because they were my Lady's, and I loved them for love of her. What most amazed me at the moment of my conversion was the simplicity with which I accepted Death—heretofore either masculine or sexless—to be a woman. After this moment, it seemed impossible that I could have ever thought of her otherwise.

It may be contested here that it ought to have hardly mattered to me whether Death were to wear the face, as it were, of either a woman or a man, for in either case, Death is Death, and there is nothing so terrible nor so unnatural as an object of veneration than that. Having made some indication of the features of my religious upbringing and geographical situation that made me an uncommon candidate for the cult of Santa Muerte, then, it may be best to acquaint you with those features of my interior self which rendered any belief system in which Death was not the principle authority and sole aspiration—that is, any religion in which life is accounted as preferable and superior to death—unsatisfactory and repellant to me. With this consideration in mind, I will dwell but briefly upon the disposition of my youth, before returning to the autumn of 2011, whence the present discourse has its proper beginning.

CHAPTER ONE – HOW THE HAND OF DEATH SOUGHT ME IN YOUTH

It must be confessed, before pursuing my object further, that I am one of those (possibly fortunate) creatures for whom childhood was in major part an irrecoverable blank. This is to say that little of it is knowable to me from memory, and that the little part which is remembered is not remembered well, but only in the form of disconnected and untraceable fragments, more composed of sensory impressions than inhabitable and relatable “memories” as such. Any chronological coherency that my earliest past can be said to maintain, therefore, has been assembled for me from hearsay, and must be trusted to somehow accommodate in its twists and folds those crude inklings of personal recollection of which my in-turning mind can untrusting lay hold. Of the exterior circumstances of my childhood, therefore, let it suffice to say that poverty, uncertainty, and unvaried misery were its constituent elements, and that terror in some form or another was never absent from the foremost workings of my consciousness. There was almost nothing that I did not fear, for there was nothing in life that was not frightful. Hunger, homelessness, humiliation, the inescapable wrath of my parents and the inexplicable hatred of my peers, these were the quotidian realities of a childhood that now courteously conceals itself even from my nightmares. From the moment of my first self-awareness, I was conscious of nothing so much as the unendurable toilsomeness of living, and the awful, desperation-inducing presentiment of anguish accorded by the most modest consideration of futurity. My freshest

and most incipient thoughts, therefore, were of abhorring life and, it must rightly be supposed, loving and hoping for what is foolishly but understandably misrepresented as its antipode, death. Thus, my first stirring of adoration for Death arose in dumb response to my otherwise unanswerable loathing for life—my own life, the animating principle abiding in my own flesh, as much as that which might be called the life around me—the appearances and activities of the world to which my person was causelessly condemned.

I was, almost from infancy, tragically sensible of having been cheated of death. Delivered of my mother immediately upon the heels of my twin and only brother, I was (as has since been related to me) less than a pound in weight, and scarcely of sufficient size to fill the palm of my father's hand. My brother, having flourished at my expense in the womb, was healthy and admirable in every respect; I was of such a quality as nature, left to herself, would have not suffered to survive for an hour in the open air. The edict of nature was not so honored, however, and I was instantly removed to the custody of various insensible machines—respirators, incubators, feeders and intravenous drips—whereby life, unbidden and unwelcome, was foisted upon a loathsome and nature-detested frame. My fury at learning this some few years later was unquenchable and all-obsessing. Whole nights were spent weeping silently in my bed for Death to forgive me my unwitting elusion and reclaim me again unto herself, while I could discern, just beyond the darkened window, the mournful murmurings of that dead family to whom I, as a babe born to death, must duly have belonged.

My parents, undiscouraged veterans of the original Jesus Movement, believed with an ardency fringing on fanaticism in the imminence of Christ's Second Coming, and the literality of the tribulations foretold in the *Apocalypse* of John. In church and before the proverbial hearth (such as a mobile home or rural slum could afford) we heard these horrors ceaselessly elaborated—opportunities for persecution and martyrdom surpassing those enjoyed by the Christians of Nero's day—lest, in the midst of God's unwarrantable procrastination, we found our capacities for anticipation exhausted. The terror, for me, was palpable but superfluous. Though I took rare consolation in the hope that the world would soon cease to be, it seemed cruel that the day of destruction should be preceded by torments and privations in excess of those with which I was already intimately familiar. It was not *this* future that terrified me in particular, but *any* future—anything other than instant and permanent oblivion. Especially horrible to me was the doctrine of the Rapture—of being lifted from earth directly into Heaven, thereby foregoing death and entering without pause into a glaring and tedious immortality. Friendless in the world, I loved Jesus as I was commanded to do, but I resented Him his resurrection, and for this I felt irremediably foredoomed. I would have been infinitely more impressed by Him had He managed to remain dead. As I grew, I felt ever more pointedly the truth of the Platonic maxim that “the body is the prison of the soul.” In the unbroken solitudes of my later boyhood, I took ever-increasingly rhapsodic delight in acts of self-mutilation, slashing my arms, breast, and face with the delirious exuberance of the chief mourner at a pagan

funeral. The innumerable scars layered upon scars deriving from these nightly orgies of bloodletting are still with me, and can be descried from a distance. All of this I excused as a prelude to the consummation whose time I wished neither to hasten nor to forestall, while—strange though it sounds even now—Death still had use for me, though the living had none. When or how this improbable consolation first occurred to me, I never could discover, though it seems to me that from a point deeply hidden by the shadows of childhood, my sense that Death was urging and beckoning me toward her was gradually annexed by a concurrent sense that Death desired me, for the moment, to pose among the living: that living *for* Death was to be my atonement for the aberration of my birth. Thus it was only by the assurance that I was already dead—that I was “death infecting life”—that existence among the living became, if not bearable, then at least defensible. It also found utility in explaining why nobody ever seemed to want me around. Society’s otherwise unaccountable rejection of me was, literally and functionally, the revulsion shown by a living organism toward the introduction of a dead one—the instinctual nausea felt in the presence of a corpse. Only the corpse cannot typically express that the disinclination is mutual.

When I was seventeen years old I acquired the attachment of a girl who, abiding with me for some while, by a predictable course became pregnant. We married clandestinely when she was eight months progressed, and on the fifth morning of April 2001 she was delivered of a daughter, to whom we gave the name Haley. The catastrophe that this event represented to my being all but confounds expression. It was as if I had brought down a

wall of perfidious and ineradicable shame betwixt myself and the Death that had been my only solace, spurning her for the brutish indulgence of a life which would now and forever be dependent upon my own. For a long period after the birth of the child, I was seized by the terrifying impression that Death had become unrecognizable to me—that the only thing of which I could be certain was now mystifying and unfathomable, and that I was estranged from it, perhaps, more than was any living thing. I *feared* death, and the fear of it consumed me, even as much as the fear of life, from which my paternal responsibilities had to no degree secured me an abatement. I looked out at death in stammering, dull-witted wonderment, and it seemed to me a thing of inexcusable senselessness and indifference. With my daughter in my arms, I thought (and I caught myself thinking it), *why must she die? What is death, that it must take what I have made?* And later, as the bewilderment eased and I began coming again to my former reason, I looked at the child and thought, *what is this that has caused my death to abandon me?* For suicide, which had been the last and only privilege assured to me by life, was now the pleasure forbidden above all. Condemning my daughter to life, I had also condemned myself.

In search of consolation, or redemption, or catharsis, I turned my energies to the writing of songs—lamentations for the living and elegies to the memory of death—which were to become the first recordings of a musical career considerable for its variety and industry but unmatched in its obscurity. It was in May of 2002, after I had been turned out of my apartment by my soon-to-be-ex-wife, that gloomy rumination upon my prospects as a singer prompted me to record the following reflections:

The universe has no good plans for me. It finds me sour and seeks to rid itself of my disagreeable presence. No matter how many may hold me in high esteem, I will be subject to that sole defining truth, and will stare with mournful resignation into the unrelenting tempests of disaster that will never cease to encroach upon my horizon. My life will be distinguished by tragedy, poverty, ruin and misery; my death will be grisly, ironic and humiliating. If I am ever remembered at all, it will be in the punch lines of low-minded jokes exchanged between drunken proletarians, peering out above losing hands of cards, eyes stinging with the smoke of cigarettes, and dulled by an inherited indifference to the beautiful and profound. To my daughter, I will be a source of shame and embarrassment. She will deny me day after day. I will be merely an incidental party in a birth she didn't choose and a past she declines to recall. My 'day in the sun' will come when the dawn gleams merrily upon my tombstone, casting deep shadows in the ruts of my name, too distant to see the folly it exposes, too great to pause and pity the ordeals of we who dance and struggle in the amphitheater of time, and are slaughtered without compunction by our celebrated Caesar, the eternal tyrant, Death. Every knee shall bow and every tongue confess the supremacy of Hades and the victory of Death. Amen.

This, then, was my state of mind and my state of affairs near the end of my nineteenth year: dejected, loveless, without cause or inclination to hope for anything more than a timely close to my already wearisome life. My eyes, it is true, were fixed unswervingly on Death, but with a gaze more of dutiful reverence than ecstatic adoration. In

the coming years my role upon the mortal stage would grow in some measure more elaborate, though my youthful prognostication of perpetual failure would by no means be disproved. I would marry again and again be divorced, I would record prolifically for no specifiable audience, I would purchase a vainglorious university education, I would make myself infamous on a negligible scale—but I would never relinquish my innate devotion to Death, nor cease preferring the society of sepulchers to the company of men. Never did it seem to me that life held any appreciable reality in the presence of death; and Death being the only constant thing, it was in my love of Death alone that I could show any constancy. I failed at last in everything but this.

CHAPTER TWO - GOODNIGHT, IRENE

In the final days of August 2011, a hurricane of such strength as I had never seen bent its aimless vengeance upon the easternmost states of the Union, doing a good deal of mischief, and—by contemporary accounts since shown to be exaggerations—effectively erasing the hamlet of Phoenicia, New York, in the foothills of the Catskill Mountains. It was enough that I believed Phoenicia was gone, and that the greater portion of my grief was caused by my not knowing whether I would rather wail or rejoice. There was no place on earth that had shown me less kindness, and no place on earth that I loved so much, as little Phoenicia, with its single, short thoroughfare and its lopsided diadem of low, purple peaks.

My romance with Phoenicia—my many romances with Phoenicia—were concluded years before that period with which the present narrative is concerned. It benefits

us only to know that all of my cruelest and most magnificent memories were interred in those piney hillsides, to arise again like the dint of an old wound whenever the thunder rolled out from the west. Believing the reports that it had vanished was, for the moment, a sensation akin to groping for a doorknob in the night—or rather, the desperate confusion that comes when no doorknob is found. Though I had spent there only two winters, and those five years apart, Phoenicia was the only place in the world in which the feeling of being lost and alone was indistinguishable from that of being home and at rest. It was the place where I had been reborn, and I had sworn that it would be the place of my death. What can be worse for the weary than having no fit place to die?

At the hour when the hurricane arrived, I was occupied as the night auditor at the ----- Resort in Kerhonkson, New York, in which town I also resided, as I had done since shortly after my second divorce in 2008. I had come to Kerhonkson in the autumn of that year, so that my daughter, who had been delivered into my custody during my second marriage, could share proximity with her mother, then an occupant of the vicinity.

The precise location of Kerhonkson is not simple to describe. Being itself nowhere, it is best understood as a point lying between two other points which are also nowhere. Emerging from the New York Thruway in the small city of Kingston (where a portion of this story will be set), one is invited by sign to continue northwest for some twenty-eight miles, toward the ragged plateau of the Shawangunk Ridge, until one reaches a place called Ellenville, which—if one were to unadvisedly pursue the suggestion—is at last realized to be *nowhere*; a gorgeous, evacuated mausoleum of a town such as only America

possesses the impatience to produce. Between Here and Kingston lies Kerhonkson. If one were to obey another sign northeast from the same point, toward and beyond the undeservedly famous town of Woodstock, one would arrive after less than an hour in Phoenicia, and would, it is likely, gain the opinion that “nowhere” is everywhere, and that wherever it is found, it is beautiful; it is the only place worth being. Everyone who dies in a nowhere-place is some kind of somebody. Research has been published to this effect, which time and the urbanization of rural localities has since shown to be both prescient and possibly too moderate. For all that they lack, both Ellenville and Phoenicia have their own funeral homes, established for the performance of those neighborly offices which were formerly given to true neighbors and true homes. Each also possesses a small and secret burial ground which, by simple desuetude and disorderliness, brings shame to the most capacious of metropolitan cemeteries.

After the hurricane had exhausted its fury upon the wretched and unready Catskills, I was barred by floodwaters and debris from returning to my cabin on the mountainside for several days, and then, only to retrieve such provisions as would sustain me for two weeks at the resort, while awaiting the restoration of electricity to my isolated neighborhood. There, quartered in the oldest and most decrepit wing of the vast building, amidst the uninterrupted pelting of rainwater in buckets and garbage pails, I adopted the task of discovering all I could about the cult of Santa Muerte, laboring with a superannuated Spanish-English dictionary to translate the one slender book I had been able to obtain on the subject.

She was a saint whose popularity in the Hispanic world was dependent upon her prodigious reputation as a thaumaturgist—a worker of miracles, to whom her grateful beneficiaries swore lifelong devotion in recompense. Though it was impossible for me to cling to her with the pure and instinctive faith of the Mexicans, I felt myself earnestly to be in need of a protector, and hoped despite my misgivings that meditation and supplication would obviate the as-yet nameless doom that seemed always just ahead of me, and always already upon me. The image of the saint whose arrival I awaited was robed in white, betokening that aspect of her which was invoked to bring peace and repel the curses of one's enemies. While I hated the business of living and neither desired nor expected to derive any happiness from it, I felt myself, now in my twenty-ninth year, to be steadily weakening beneath the weight of ever-incessant misfortune, disappointment, and heartbreak. All who knew me, and they were few enough indeed, were forced to admit the uncanny familiarity I seemed to share with the evil face of Fortune, while having rarely been granted a glimpse of her fair and beneficent mien. Venturing little in life, I had nevertheless managed to lose all, and that small degree which I had timorously gained back—my hovel of a home, my pittance of a job, the tentative and comfortless love of one or two women—I sensed with certainty that I was about to lose again. There was, in this sense, little of the preternatural. Earlier that month, I had embarked on the final semester of my second bachelor's degree, which was to be attained in conjunction with a certification to teach English in New York. The final stage of this process, which I would begin in September, was to take the form of two student-teaching placements, each about two months long,

in the seventh and tenth grades respectively. These requiring the same devotion of time and attention as actual teaching, albeit without the compensation, I knew already that I would be obliged to surrender both my position at the resort and my little cabin in the woods, the rent being costlier than my savings could sustain. I had already applied to my twin brother, with whom I had no very affectionate bond, to take up temporary residence in the partially finished basement of the large Victorian house he had lately purchased for himself and his family: a wife, two children, and a Labrador. With a great show of reluctance, he conceded to admit me from October until December, at the rate of four hundred dollars a month, and with the express provision that while abiding there, I would keep nor consume no whiskey. In preparation for the coming drought, I increased my daily imbibition from a third of liter to a full pint—little though it did to increase my cheer.

As much of my present malaise as was due to the relinquishment of my home and livelihood, more perhaps was due to the loathing I privately harbored for the profession into which I sought by these sacrifices to be admitted. Having already squandered four years earning a degree in journalism, of which, being disinclined to seek work in the city, I could scarcely make use, I felt compelled by the injunctions of time and circumstance to adopt a new course by which something approaching a proper living might be made. Years before this I had entered upon my education with the object of making myself a teacher, but had been waylaid by bad luck and bad council, and now found it prudent—if personally uncongenial—to renew my original intention. But I hated

the schools, and the new theories of teaching were abominable to me. The idea of allowing young students to pretend that any good would come of their labors, or that any amount of true satisfaction was possible in the world of corporate inanities and consumerist fictions for which they were being programmed, doubled me over with spiritual nausea and inspired in me the acutest intellectual horror. I entertained visions of affixing a noose over the desk of every student, so that, whenever the truth of life's futility were to suddenly reveal itself to one of them, he could merely stand up, mount his chair, and push off into the infinite. Graduation, I imagined, might consist of lining the youngsters blindfolded against a wall and lobbing fistfuls of excrement in their faces until the metaphor of their existence was sufficiently comprehended. Had I set my eyes on becoming a stockbroker or a seller of snake oils, I could not have chosen a more dishonest or discreditable occupation, and the more approbation I received from my professors in the teaching program, the lower my opinion became of myself.

This soul-sickness did not fail to make itself visible, not only in my continuously resorting to the flask and the bottle, but in the slow and insidious development of a nameless illness that, as it progressed, enervated me so much as to make me almost a cripple. My acquaintances were bemused to find me leaning feebly upon a walking stick, while for nearly two months, a dry, consumptive cough stayed with me day and night. At the nadir of my affliction, I gave myself up to the serene and grateful conviction that I was soon to die—that I would simply weaken and weaken until, unable to rise and not caring to eat, I would waste into nothing and suffer no more. It would save me the trouble of killing myself by some more

assertive means later on.

Bent over my books with my bottle dwindling beside me, endeavoring to initiate myself into the arcane practices of a macabre Mexican folk-religion, I spent the last days of August waiting for the waters to recede, and pondering the irony—detected, perhaps, only by myself—of the storm’s having been named “Irene.” Continuously upon my lips was the old song, “Goodnight, Irene,” a rewritten version of which I had recorded myself the previous year. But I found myself singing the old Lead Belly version, as I thought of the rampaging brown torrents that the changeless streets of Phoenicia had become, as had the only road leading to and from the Hudson Valley Resort. And I recalled how, in the tiny, hidden graveyard by the overpass on State Route 28, where one might flash past Phoenicia in an instant without taking note of its existence, I used to sit in the company of my sullen young friends, and listen to the cascading Esopus Creek as it raged across the boulders and the fallen oaks that protruded like enormous bones all along its twisting course. And I could almost picture myself singing to them, these precocious schoolgirls to whom life was already incredibly old, that lifespan in a quatrain, that fragment between epigram and epitaph:

*Sometimes I live in the country,
Sometimes I live in the town,
Sometimes I take a great notion
To jump in the river and drown.*

CHAPTER THREE - VEILS AND TRAINS

I broke off my engagement to Lorelei in June of 2011, four months before our wedding was scheduled to take place. Lorelei, who had adopted this name herself after being christened with something far less romantic, was in good spirits after several hours of visiting our usual Kingston haunts, prattling about the usual inconsequential topics—the wedding being foremost among these, however much it pained me to hear it mentioned. I had tried,

147

throughout the day, to retain an unaltered demeanor toward Lorelei; what pensiveness and hesitancy I betrayed went completely unmarked by her. The grim announcement, which I delivered in conciliatory tones as we sat parked outside the doorstep of her parents' home, came to her as the most unanticipated and bewildering of calamities. The day was hot; I rolled up the windows as Lorelei's screaming and wailing began. For many minutes, I could not prevail upon her to get out of the car, nor could I induce myself to try to remove her by my own power—so I listened to her weeping with that frantic, choking desolation that was particular to her among all the women I had known. It was only by giving her the fallacious assurance that the marriage was not to be canceled altogether, but merely deferred until a more practical date, that she submitted to getting out—though not without an unbroken continuation of her gasping tears and poisonous execrations. Her first conclusion, however I endeavored to contradict it, was that my affections had been usurped by some other woman—her refrain, between sobs, was, *Who is she? Who is she?* Hoarsely I answered, *There's no one. There's no one.*

I drove away in cowardly haste as soon as Lorelei was safely on the sidewalk, and I saw her in the rearview mirror, tottering after me in her tall black heels, her black skirt and her elaborate lace stockings, her gargantuan purse wagging on her slender arm. She was still howling, still shrieking, her whole length crumbling beneath that ghastly, uncontainable rage. I continued on numbly for some miles, unperceptive of my destination, until arriving in the parking lot of the town's largest liquor store, where I parked facing the railroad tracks and turned off my car. Taking out my phone, I called Danielle, whose quiet and demure salutation arrived after several rings. *I've just broken off the wedding with Lorelei*, I told her, just loudly enough to hear myself over the methodical clanking of an interminable freight train that was creeping into some unseen depot nearby. *Oh!* she said, and, after a pause of three or four seconds, she asked me how I was feeling. *I don't know yet*, I responded. Fixing my gaze on the train, it was as if I could read my emotions printed on each of the slow-rolling, dull-colored crates: shame following upon elation, love following upon dread, torment following upon transport. I said, *I don't want you to think that I'm trying to place you under any kind of obligation. It would have had to be done regardless of any complicating circumstances. But*, I added, *I'd like to see you—tonight, if you can get away from your mother.* Danielle answered vaguely but reassuringly, she'd see what could be done.

My hands were shaking when I closed the call; there was something unidentifiably agonizing about the torpidity with which the locomotive lurched along, like a headless

leviathan patiently entwining some gray, asphyxiated world. Dizzily, my heart clanging fitfully like the pots and kettles of a trudging peddler, I went inside to buy the largest bottle of bourbon I could afford, and felt some small relief when Kingston was safely behind me. I reflected, and not for the first time, on how all things seemed to begin and end for me in Kingston—my first marriage, my second marriage, my brief boyhood loves, and now my unlikely engagement to this captivating child with the siren's name. Every street and storefront bore the psychic cipher of some private tragedy.

I had not been falling in love with the same regularity as in former times, and until my dalliance with Danielle began early in the month of June, I had begun to suspect that old age and a surfeit of battle-weary caution had put an end to this once-vigorous propensity of mine. Perhaps it was by a sheer effusion of gratitude for its unexpected return that I put an axe to the wedding plans, like the father of the Prodigal Son slaughtering his prize calf. I had not lied to Danielle about my reasons; practical considerations had already made the wedding impossible, and Lorelei was indignant at any suggestion of moderation. Progressive and emancipated though she gave pretense to being, her old-world Romanian heritage left her with the enduring conviction that of all occasions in a woman's life—even if she is marrying a man who has made record work of two brides already—a wedding is not the time to be stingy, nor even pragmatic. With the date established for October, and my own fortunes soon to be strained to their last degree, there was now no question that I had made a blundering miscalculation in proposing to Lorelei when I did, and indulging her unrestrained

expectations as I had. But after years of being conjoined with her through a parade of relentless miseries, it was good to see the girl happy. It was good to know that one of us was in love.

Since something less than two years after my second marriage, Lorelei had been the most loyal and persistent of my mistresses. She was seventeen when I met her, and it was the detection of our involvement by my wife that first shook and finally toppled our nuptial union, which had been, at any rate, only intermittently harmonious. Lorelei remained tenaciously attached to me after my divorce in 2008, despite my occasional efforts to dislodge her, and for much of the time thereafter she was my only companion, even residing with me for a period when I first came to Kerhonkson. From the day of our first acquaintance until the time of our last meeting, in the summer when my narrative concludes, she remained in all but the subtlest respects the same girl she had been at seventeen—spoiled, tempestuous, irrepressibly brash, and imperturbably oblivious to the rigors of adulthood. My proposal of marriage was made as much with the hope that by making her a wife, I might by some prodigy also make her a woman, as with the resigned acceptance that I would most likely never be rid of her anyway. The fanciful proportions that she attached to the wedding itself proved, through the engagement, how dismally misguided my fantasy of maturing her had been.

I had never married for love before, and the fact that I didn't passionately love Lorelei presented no particular obstacle to the union, as long as it seemed in accordance with the natural course of things. When, in June of 2011, I

believed myself to have really fallen in love with Danielle, with a bright, obliterating passion so many years unknown to me, the natural course of things seemed to have been abruptly and irrecoverably altered. I allowed myself to believe, however briefly, that Fate had at last intervened on my behalf. For a week, perhaps, after the engagement was renounced, I experienced the quite unfamiliar and, on reflection, enormously unpleasant desire to *live*—to do things, to see things, to rise up from my languor and walk in the light that shown from Danielle's beatific body. I even thought, at the pinnacle of my delirium, that it might be nice to start drinking less. The moment I had expressed as much to Danielle, while we sat together in the morning sun on the university campus where we had met, I realized the profundity of the error I had committed, of the blasphemy to which I had given utterance. The curse was irrevocable. Death must sentence me to life.

Accepting the evident superstitiousness of the statement—for all reasonable men must confess that superstition has its place—I believe that I can trace what might be referred to as the Great Unraveling of my already fragile and precarious post-divorce existence to this precise point, and to this solitary utterance. Instrumental as she was in granting me the courage and impetus to unfetter myself from that ill-considered commitment, which would have proved unimaginably ruinous and regrettable to both Lorelei and me, I have frequently and soberly pondered the possibility that Danielle was, so to speak, both a messenger and an implement of Death—deployed, not to kill me, but to wrest me from that vulgar complacency with which I had begun to unconsciously account myself one of the living, and permit

me to see with a vividness beyond mistaking that *life is nothing but the self-realization of Death through decay*.

CHAPTER FOUR - BY THE DUCK-POND

It was while taking a summer course in Gothic literature at the State University at New Paltz that I first encountered Danielle—taking little note of her initially, except as the young lady in the front of the classroom, with the peculiar face and preternaturally impeccable posture. I do not recall thinking her beautiful at first assessment; but it is unusual for me to think *anyone* beautiful at first assessment, all humanity being to some extent physically repugnant to me. In a crowd, I am confronted by nothing but caricatures and grotesques, and it is only when an individual body has been found to encase a beautiful soul, or the face to conceal an intricate mind, that the body itself can begin to interest me. This fact has persistently caused bafflement and discomfort in my idle associations with other men, for whom the world may be best represented by the example of a revolving magazine rack.

After a number of weeks had elapsed in the semester, Danielle began, as it seemed, to seek me out in the library lobby, where I would often sit and read for an hour or two before class. She would quietly take the seat across from mine, greeting me silently with her massive brown eyes and inscrutable pout, until I undertook to begin a conversation. We would speak on indifferent matters for ten minutes or so, then she would excuse herself on some pretense, and I would see her again in class—acknowledging me only by turning and regarding

me when I ventured to expostulate on some subject or other, in reaction to which she would evince no expression, and in response, offer only the silence of a spectator. Her stare, in this way, began to take on a presence of its own, though I could detect little of the personality or intellect behind it. In class, she was barely visible and never heard. In conversation, she seemed genteel, self-conscious, haughty without malice, and, far beneath all this, inexpressibly wounded and disconsolate. On this last account alone was I curious.

About midway through June, Danielle sent me a note acknowledging her awareness of my engagement to Lorelei, but conveying nevertheless the hope that “our intermittent meetings might develop into a friendship.” She desired me to know, as I had already perceived, that however incandescent an appearance she maintained, she was haunted by the knowledge that life possessed a far grimmer aspect, and she suspected that I was—for reasons as yet unaccounted by her—uniquely sympathetic to this impression. It was, in short, a note precisely formulated to caress my vanity and provoke my interest. It having been prophesied to my parents that I would grow to be a renowned evangelist and wonder-worker, I have always suffered under the impulsion—antithetical to my otherwise nihilistic sensibilities—to be a comforter and a counselor; a quality which has made me, at times, sententious beyond endurance. Of all positions in this world, it is that of the dedicated ecclesiastic that I envy the most. Feeling elevated far beyond my normal condition, I made immediate and enthusiastic reply, suggesting a time for us to meet the next day. To Lorelei, who was at that moment about some private business in the adjoining

room, I said nothing of the correspondence—only passing the remainder of the night, I recall, in an agitated but uncommonly cheerful mood. Not since my days in the secret graveyard with my circle of young admirers, then fully four years behind me, had I felt so marvelously important.

At the appointed time the following day, directly after the conclusion of our class, I brought Danielle to a wooden bench by the side of a broad pond, where the university's resident community of geese was variously engaged in

156

paddling, pecking, and preening. The moment we had sat down, she confided to me that her father, for whom she had possessed the greatest tenderness, had been lost to cancer the year before, and that she had henceforth been thrown into impenetrable darkness and confusion—seeming to live neither in the world nor out of it. Her life had lost its course, she said, and she longed for nothing but to hear her father's voice again, and to know what he desired her to do. She entreated me to tell her my thoughts on the immortality of the soul or the continuation of the consciousness, and to explain to her, if it was possible, how it is that the living can be expected to construct any sense or meaning for life, which death cannot in one instant sweep into meretricious irrelevancy. Even when speaking so earnestly, Danielle was the epitome of poise, except when, here and there, her words seemed to fail her, at which times she would blush very slightly, and with an imploring look, wait for me to interject the term for which she seemed to be reaching. As these first, striking intimations unfolded, I began for the first time to take measure of her personal charms, even so

much as to think her pretty, and to reflect upon the mellifluous pleasantness of her voice. Still, I sat on the opposite end of the bench from her and ventured not to diminish the distance between us.

Though the matters on which she dwelled had been the subjects of my whole life's contemplations, I began by confessing that my answers may be found to be less than satisfactorily exact. Nevertheless, I replied to her substantially in this way. In spite of all of science's efforts to denigrate and discredit those means by which psychical researchers and spiritual seekers sought their own proofs of futurity, I remained both personally and objectively convinced that man's existence does not conclude upon the termination of his material life—that something of what provides us with our humanity—our “divine spark,” as Plotinus would have it—must in some capacity continue that struggle towards perfection by which all civilized endeavor is undoubtedly kindled. I was very certain, furthermore, that for the majority of the dead, the ties of familial and social affection are not immediately severed upon physical expiration, and that there is always some degree—however imperceptible—of continued interaction between the fleshly and the spiritual dimensions, which can take forms ranging from dreams, to apparitions, to natural omens and baffling coincidences. It is very likely, I asserted, that her father's lingering presence could, with vigilance, be perceived through these or other phenomena—supposing, indeed, she wanted or required such assurances, disconcerting though they may be.

Danielle appeared gratified by these remarks, and I paused for a space to assemble my thoughts in the bright,

squirming striations that flashed upon the water's surface. Death, I continued, is not justly to be understood as the antithesis of life, nor is life to be thought of as being in any degree different from or opposed to death. They are both manifestations of the same original force, operating in unison toward the same ineluctable and unknowable aim. Accustomed though we may be to ordering our world through the identification of opposites—good and evil, light and darkness, life and death—the truth is, as Hegel went to such stupendous lengths to show, that each so-called opposite is merely the instrument by which its own opposite is revealed; in other words, there is no such thing as a one-sided coin, or a line with only one end. Each, without the other, would have no existence at all. Therefore, to question what meaning life can possess in the continuous and inescapable face of death, is to no purpose, since life without death would be not only meaningless, but impossible.

Here Danielle stopped me to inquire if I had not, then, just contradicted my previous defense of immortality. *For what is immortality*, she asked, *if it isn't "life without death?"*

Commending her for her perspicacity, I returned that the confusion lies in the limitations we have placed upon the definition of life—and, for that matter, death. Absorbed as we are with our own physical world and our own physical beings, we can scarcely be blamed for defining life along purely biological and phenomenological lines: that is, animate rather than inanimate, active rather than inert, etc. For all this, however, the most we are able to do is to demonstrate the superficial differences between

those things which seem to us alive, and those which do not, without actually understanding what *life itself* is—what it is that inspires or invests living things with that indefinable and, at first, wholly involuntary injunction to *live*. At the other side of life, then, there is something trying to reveal itself or realize itself, without which this spontaneous and inexplicable cooperation of elements we recognize as “life” could never have been. To take an Eastern perspective, this might be best understood as an underlying Nothingness endeavoring to express its incomprehensible non-being *through* Being. By its continuously becoming, it is forever in pursuit of its own eternal and inextinguishable undoing. In a way that finds an intriguing if problematic corollary in the metaphor of the Crucifixion, God is the original and archetypal suicide, violently pursuing His ultimate repose.

Here I ceased, realizing that I had begun to lapse into a reverie of my own, which Danielle was clearly at pains to follow. At my suggestion, we took lunch together at a café in the village, during which a strange reticence or reluctance seemed to constrain her conversation, giving way to a prevailing sense of mutual discomfort. I walked her to her car, which was still parked on campus, and we parted ways with a handshake that seemed, if anything, vaguely apologetic—though her last gaze was pregnant with something like conflicted yearning, and she was not eager, once she had my hand, to release it.

I was tormented, on my return up the mountainside to my cabin, by a sharp sensation of disappointment and failure. The congenial reunion of two disunited souls which her first message portended had, despite a hopeful beginning,

somehow never materialized. I concluded, after some hours' rumination, that the source of this unexpected discomfiture could only have been the absence of alcohol, without which indispensable elixir no conversation of value ever takes place. With this conviction in mind, I took her the next night to the open-air patio of a tavern in the village, where we drank gin-and-tonics until a late hour, and retired at last to her shared condominium nearby, where I awoke the next morning beside her.

Thus in a few days' time, Danielle and I went from being near-strangers to being the most deeply entangled intimates, while I became—not for the first time in my life—a philanderer, oath-breaker, and cad. What was blindingly clear from the instant my eyes opened upon the pulsating slots of sunlight on the clean walls of Danielle's bedroom, was that I could no longer maintain the diabolical farce of loving Lorelei. Worlds and solar systems ignited before me, and even with my heart threatening to explode out of my chest, I smiled and held my companion nearer.

CHAPTER FIVE - RED AND BLACK

The renunciation of my vows to Lorelei in no measure secured my relationship with Danielle, which, even while continuing more or less happily for perhaps the span of a week or less, never took on a particularly promising character. The girl was habitually irresolute and timorous, and I, hurled into the chaos created by my cancellation of the forthcoming nuptials, was sorely desirous of greater assurances than she could by her nature provide. There was, ever-gapingly between us, a great gulf of

temperament, will, and experience, which the physical consolations which passed between us were pitifully insufficient to fill. This had been substantially the case with Lorelei as well, but Lorelei had been fanatically devoted to me for years already, and, despite our innumerable differences, knew me better than a sibling. What knowledge Danielle claimed to have of me came almost entirely from such writings of mine as she had been able to locate on the Internet, amounting to a few books and journals of poems and other miscellany. Her appreciation of these was dangerously flattering to me, though she was soon obliged to confess that much of what she had read therein, though beautiful, was far from encouraging to my prospects as a partner, suitor, or denizen of mankind. How could a man so persistently and oppressively disparaging of existence ever hope to make her happy, or find happiness with her? How could a man who had been unfaithful to his wife, and then to his fiancé, be trusted to maintain his fidelity? How could a man who had never found anything but misery in love and horror in sex have any possibility of reforming these views now? I would attempt, every day, to supply answers to these and similar interrogations, but the next day she would read something else, which would overrule my arguments, and set her fretting and brooding afresh.

It transpired at last that Danielle's mother, the small-statured Peruvian widow who dominated and designed her daughter's life in every particular, leveled an irrevocable interdiction upon the relationship—her reason being that she, too, had discovered some of my writings, and had concluded upon my being “the Devil.” Though Danielle was by every definition an adult, being then fully

twenty-four years of age, she was the helpless thrall of her mother's benefactions, and was—as her only child and the last living member of her household—justifiably wary of bringing the woman further grief than Fate had already seen fit to incur. When Danielle informed me of this development, however, I was unable to withhold my indignation, and I entreated her, for the sake of her self-respect, to pay the injunction no regard.

Thus began our continuously more perverse and frenzied modern-day rendition of *Romeo and Juliet*, with Danielle appearing unannounced on my doorstep, staying half the night, then making a sometimes dramatic, sometimes surreptitious retreat, wracked with guilt and pursued by shapeless terrors. After two or so weeks of this my own nerves were nearly ruined. The comparative placidity of my former relationship with Lorelei began to take on a nostalgic hue, while my own guilt regarding the manner and cause of its dissolution brought torture even to those moments when Danielle lay quiet and contented in my arms.

From the moment of our separation, Lorelei had never ceased to tax my phone with text messages and voicemails, at first to buffet me with every curse and imprecation her fertile imagination could devise, then, after about a fortnight, to implore me in tones ever more doleful and pathetic, to simply speak to her—to shun her friendship no longer, even if I would not accept her love. By degrees my resistance was exhausted, and I began to entertain these sorrowful conjurations. Because she was only faintly acquainted with Danielle's existence, knowing her only to be a classmate with whom I infrequently held converse,

the reason for my abruptly calling our engagement to a close remained, to Lorelei, the most impermeable of mysteries, and I was content to preserve her in the delusion that my decision had been entirely practical. I explained that my silence—however cruel and inexcusable—was only intended to last until her anger had subsided, and she could reasonably be brought to understand the nature of my apprehensions regarding the wedding. I made no request for the return of the engagement ring, and she continued to wear it as a reminder of my eventual intention—once my studies were largely concluded and my future was somewhat assured—to make her my wife: an intention, it must be said, which I ventured neither to positively advance nor entirely dismiss. Soon I began to meet her in Kingston again, and, with Danielle resolving more often than not to honor her mother's prohibition, my relations with Lorelei little-by-little resumed something of their original pattern. Lorelei was approving of my interest in the Santa Muerte cult, recognizing in it some elements consistent with her own half-hearted neo-pagan practices, and while I awaited the arrival of the statue that I had ordered from Mexico City, she assisted me readily in preparing the altar that would be the saint's home. It was now, conveniently, the beginning of September, and decorations for the Halloween holiday were easily to be found, which answered neatly to my purpose. I purchased several boards of sturdy particle wood, painted them black, and made them into a box that would constitute the shrine itself. This I established on a shelf next to my bed, and placed around it all the ritual and decorative elements the altar would require when the image arrived: candles, artificial flowers, a bottle of drugstore perfume, an

ashtray, various little skulls hanging here and there, and a liter of tequila with which the whole would be consecrated at the time of the statue's installation. Halloween being the signal highlight of Lorelei's year, her girlish glee at joining me in these preparations almost exceeded expression. Even if she could not marry me in October as she had intended—and the thought of this invariably brought her a moment of gloom—I was nevertheless hers again, and the order she had enjoyed was in great degree restored to the world.

I confess that I do not recall how Lorelei became conscious of the extent of my relations with Danielle, nor how Danielle gained the knowledge of my renewed friendship with Lorelei. Doubtless it was some message or exchange of another kind left imprudently open on a computer screen, or the appearance of one or the other's name during an incoming phone-call. When I was with one of them, I would be obliged to ignore the calls and messages that came from the other, which would invariably excite the suspicions and worries of the unattended party, and cause her to try to reach me through even more excessive and urgent measures. Ensuring that one of them would not find me unexpectedly in the company of the other was an intricate task, requiring no small degree of continuous caution and vigilance, and sometimes finding me inveigled in bald lies and bungled stratagems, from which no sleight of hand or feat of genius could extract me. Still neither would relinquish her claim to my attentions, and I could induce myself to lay neither of the rivals aside. While there was no question that I was in love only with Danielle, her constant indecision and vacillation was both maddening

and painful, and I had no source of solace for this grief than the familiar presence of my former mistress and, with the exception of one male confidant, my only friend. Two early marriages had left me ill prepared for a life devoid of romantic love, however erratic, unsuitable, or conditional that love so often was.

Once, while I was in Kingston, drinking in a bar while my car was with the mechanic, I began receiving messages from Danielle to the effect that she was in despair, and intended to poison herself. Being unable to ignore such an urgent—though almost surely hyperbolic—declaration, but indisposed to rush to New Paltz, I tried for some time to reason with Danielle, whose threats—coming at a pace faster than I could reply to—grew only more adamant. Finally the message came that Danielle had swallowed a bottle of antidepressant pills and was awaiting the effects, whatever they may be. Helpless to take any other action, I did what was to me most despicable, and sent the police to her apartment with an ambulance. I could not suppose that Danielle expected anything else, as she knew that I could not then personally go to her aid. Still, I had been forced onto many ambulances myself over the years, under circumstances not entirely dissimilar, and would have preferred to die rather than spend another night in the emergency room, or any period at all in the hospital's mental ward. I had resolved henceforth never to forgive anyone who called the police on my behalf again. Much of me remonstrated with myself that what Danielle had ingested was almost certainly not fatal, and that, in any case, it was her own choice to end her life in whatever way she saw fit; though, on the other hand, she seemed to be cajoling me into intervening somehow, and might have

thought me callous if I had not. Lorelei, who had come to meet me at the bar, sucked contemptuously at her frozen margarita and chided me for giving in to Danielle's insatiable and embarrassing need for attention.

After an hour or more had passed, word arrived from Danielle herself that she had been taken to a hospital in Kingston, and I prevailed on Lorelei (God knows how) to drive me over so I could see into her condition. Leaving Lorelei brooding with her cigarettes in the car, I was issued into a curtained-off portion of the emergency unit, where I saw Danielle was awake and serene, reclining demurely on a mechanized gurney, with a small, dark-complexioned woman, who I immediately apprehended to be her mother, seated beside her. The woman scowled when she saw the restrained tenderness with which I greeted her daughter, but did not refuse my hand when I offered it in introduction. Taking a seat across from her, with Danielle lying table-like between us, I undertook to acknowledge that I could reasonably be held to blame for the girl's wild discontent, but only inasmuch as our love for each other was anathema to her mother, whose disapproval she was desperate to avoid. I loved Danielle, I proclaimed, and owed to her the only happiness I had felt in years—a fact that, if anything, was verified by the extraordinary moroseness of those youthful writings which were the cause of my vilification. Danielle took my hand warmly as I spoke, and for a moment I felt sure that I could charm her mother into adopting reason. On meeting Danielle, I continued, it was as if the veil of my past sorrows was lifted, and a heart that had lain cold and unresponsive in my breast by steady striving arose and took new courage. Since then, however, I had been

riven to the marrow at watching how Danielle struggled under the conflict created by her mother's understandable but misguided censure, owing all love and devotion to the one who gave her life, but perceiving how deeply she was needed by the one whose life her love restored. It is for this reason that she was driven to this pitiable and frantic end, for this reason that she lay thus silently and helplessly between us—so that her mother could see for herself that I was no kind of devil, and hear from my own lips the truth of my love for her unduly distressed daughter.

Danielle gazed at me sweetly as I concluded my declamation, but the woman remained sullen and shook her head doubtfully. Her only response, made in strong South American accents, was to thank me for seeing after her daughter's safety—by which it was implied that she would not, in the future, let the girl so far from her sight. I took my leave by kissing Danielle's hand and vowing to make restitution for the sorrow I had caused her, remembering only then that I had met my first wife's mother under strangely similar circumstances—by the side of a hospital bed, after the pregnancy had been detected. I nearly swooned to behold again how my life seemed to return upon itself in ever-descending and ever-contracting circles. On going out to Lorelei, I begged her pardon for my long absence, and she scolded me for showing Danielle such undeserved indulgence.

No parting of the clouds came as a result of my meeting with Danielle's immovable mother. Rather, while admitting that she could understand her daughter's fascination with me, the woman became only more convinced that my sable speech disguised a mind festering

with untold wickedness, and that Danielle's life and sanity depended absolutely upon her unreserved disavowal of me. Learning this from Danielle, I began in earnest to despair of our union ever being possible while her mother lived, and responded by adding both a red candle and a black candle to my now-completed altar: the former to aid Danielle in her resolution to choose me over her remorseless matron, and the latter to work against whatever foul machinations the woman had conjured to impede us. I found, once the altar was in place, that such credulous gestures came easily to me, though my "prayer" consisted mainly of standing before the statue and drinking glasses of tequila, after anointing her head with an oblation of the same. Perhaps I had the idea that, like Danielle herself, the drunker I got *La Santisima*, the more favor she would show me.

The consensus among those who have attempted to excavate the origins of the Santa Muerte cult is that her thaumaturgical reputation was first established among those who found her intercession useful in the returning of truant lovers—a conclusion borne out by the first printed prayer distributed in her honor, which was composed for the express benefit of forsaken mistresses, girlfriends, and wives. Though I had conceived of the altar primarily as a place upon which to center my directionless and formless religious impulses, for the satisfaction of which no church and no operative tradition seemed to exist, this facilitating function of the skeletal saint could hardly have been expected to escape my interest in the midst of my romantic tribulations. What I hoped she would do for me as I stood swaying in concentration before her sepulchral image, I myself didn't dare to say—unless it was

to strike me down with her own scythe, and leave my charred and scabrous heart to be divided among the many who once might have claimed the whole for themselves.

PART TWO: STARVATION DIARY

My Hunger Strike Against Life Itself

Friday, December 9, 2011

AN INTRODUCTION TO MY REASONING

I don't expect that anyone will read what is contained in this journal until after my pilgrimage has been completed, and I'm not concerned with adhering to the conventions of "blogging," such as the frequent inclusion of images and the avoidance of prolixity, etc. I certainly do not hope that anyone will turn to this diary with intention of being entertained by it; although I would not be troubling myself to undertake it publicly, if I were not sure of its potential to be informative. It is not typical, in the realm of non-fictional writing, to be able to follow a person's thoughts step-for-step to the door of death--or at least as near to it as my strength will allow me to continue writing for. It galls me somewhat to be leaving this record here in the digital realm, but of course I cannot trust that anything set down by more palpable means would ever be made available to the public. It is for this reason that I accept the price of pseudonymity along with the benefit of immediacy thus afforded. I do not suppose that my identity, once my destination is reached, will go very long

unrealized by those with an interest in discovering it. The purpose of this journal, as suggested by the title, is simply to follow me (and to strengthen me) in my resolution, made on the present morning, never to eat again, and thereby to cease my life. I have considered other means of self-annihilation, naturally, but I have found them all too abrupt and uncertain, and I should like my voyage toward extinction to be an interesting one, availing me of the opportunity for meditation along the way. Rather than suicide outright, I prefer to think of this venture as an experiment in asceticism--a long and definitive fast, or, as I have already referred to it, a stationary pilgrimage through a little-examined travail, to the very source of the Mystery itself. Having found no meaning, satisfaction, or contentment in the practice of living, I can only hope and presume that these things will come to me, in one form or another, in the practice of dying, through an abject refusal to sustain my own life. Though I have considered this course frequently throughout the past year, and perhaps in a vague way throughout my life before that, I made the decision absolutely a little more than an hour ago, while driving myself away from what would have been a job interview at the local branch of a certain very large toy retailer. A succession of personal failures and unhappy circumstances have forced me to take menial work of the seasonal variety, and this would have been the second such post--the first, in which I intend to continue for the present, being at the perfume counter of a well-known department store. It is partly because I felt ashamed of myself for accepting such work, and partly because of the nausea and dismay that I felt upon entering the warehouse-sized toy-store, and hearing the Christmas

jingles, and seeing the multitude of clamoring consumers, that I fled before my contact could make her way out to meet me. I drove away with tears in my eyes, knowing with all certitude that I could not continue in this world--that I wanted no more of it under any conditions. Nevertheless, I am committed to dying passively--not through a rash and grandiose act of passionate despair, but through the purely philosophical determination that no mode of life that is available to me in this society, however noble or however ignominious it may be, is worthy of my toleration. The lowest of urchins does not deserve to suffer under the burden of humanity as it is presently constituted--to live as humans now must live. I am, therefore, ashamed of my race, and ashamed to exist as a member thereof, and it is according to this premise that my mortification is begun.

ON DRINK AND DEVOTIONS

It is clear that I must establish for myself parameters and conditions, according to which success in my endeavor can be assured. My first act should, I think, be to rid my small living area--the basement of my brother's house, which I have come to inhabit out of indigence--of what little food and reminders of food are present. Though my determination is fixed today, it may take me more than a month to attain my purpose, and I know not what torment or temptation the presence of victuals around me will create in the first days. I have heard that after a while, my hunger (which is an annoyance right now) will be replaced by a certain euphoria, to which I look fondly forward. My last "meal" was yesterday evening, perhaps at one o'clock in the morning, when I prepared for myself a can

of cream-of-mushroom soup. Before this on the morning previous, I had half of an egg sandwich, which was thrust upon me by my sister-in-law--whose future offerings of nourishment I must somehow encounter with delicacy and prudence. I must persevere in remembering that I have embarked upon the only sure path to salvation--to delivery from the plague of modern existence--and that I will never conquer this world if I allow my animal desire for sustenance to conquer my wits or my will instead.

I must be careful, too, if I am to continue my nightly practice of drinking whiskey, lest the liquor softens my resolve, and induces me, for instance, to open another can of soup, or permit myself a slice of bread. Here is further reason for finding some way of discarding or concealing the edible contents of my kitchen. It seems, however, important that the possibility of eating remains, so that I can continue to consciously refuse it, in both symbolic and factual repudiation of life. I would be pleased to continue drinking beer, which is a great consolation to me, but I do not want to be guilty of somehow mistakenly sustaining myself or prolonging my survival by means of the calories the beer contains. On this point I stand perplexed; though, really, there is no possibility that a body can subsist upon beer the way it does upon solid food, though it may aid me a little in assuaging my hunger pangs. But ought they to be assuaged, if my mortification--my martyrdom--be sincere?

I must, it is clear, devise a system of religious devotions, so that my passage out of life is not one of comfortless spiritual vacuity. Since Death itself is my goal, I ought to be able to center these devotions upon the *Santa Muerte*

altar that I already maintain in my closet; though I must of course cease making my oblations of food and live flowers to the figure, as this would be both antithetical to my purpose, and a troublesome lure to my flesh. Luckily, this altar has been rather neglected lately, owing somewhat to my poverty, and somewhat to my religious inconstancy, so the last offerings I made of this kind have long since rotted and been cast away. I have no way of knowing what offense I may be rendering to the skeletal saint by depriving her of these traditional considerations, but I hope that my logic for doing so will be obvious to her, and that she will be satisfied as my attentions continue in the form of burning incense and keeping her shrine well-swept.

The prayers already written for both the conventional Christian traditions and the ancillary Santa Muerte cult will be of no use to me, as they are all concerned with assuring the benefit of those who wish to persist in the mortal condition, however freely of mortal passions and wants. I may be able to find some prayers for the dying which I can practice uttering reflexively as my pilgrimage proceeds toward its necessarily unpleasant end.

THE ELYSIUM OF THE TORMENTED

On my telephone three messages have been left. The first is from the county mental health office, in response to a request to begin intake proceedings, which I was forced to make yesterday while seeing a psychotherapist, who determined that my problems were "too severe and complex" for her to handle independently. The second is from the woman who had intended to hire me at the toy

store this morning, and the third is from my sister's domestic partner, who also works at the toy store, and by whose referral I applied for the job. I have already assured myself that none of these calls will be returned. Clearly, I am no longer disposed to accept whatever "treatment" the mental health office would propose for me, since it would surely entail some effort--most likely hospitalization--to prevent or dissuade me from carrying out my terminal renunciation of food. The others calls are no longer a concern for me, as I can most assuredly not abide the thought of taking work--however temporary--in such a place, at such a season, when the full enormity of the consumerist spirit is so boundlessly exhibited for the dubious benefit of the soulless children conceived under its influence. I have little need for money now, and no concern for survival. To ward off complete social isolation, however, I mean to retain my position at the department store until the point, which sits ineluctably upon the horizon, when I am too weakened by my self-assumed privations to return. Until then, I must continue to be reminded of the society and the culture from which I am so dramatically endeavoring to dis sever myself: a society of devourers, a culture of insatiability, characterized by wantonness and gluttony of every kind. I do not hold myself above it, of course; rather, I am doing what I must for my own redemption, as a penance for my incontinence, my complicity. *Consumer*, I have commanded my body as it stretches upon its cross, *consume thyself*.

A few nights ago, I had the good fortune of bearing witness for the first time as an acquaintance of mine injected herself in the arm with a dose of heroin. I had always

been curious to view such a procedure, and I confess that I watched it with an interest contiguous upon the hinterland of perversity, making fastidious note of the way she bound off her upper arm with a long electrical cord, wrapped twice and secured between crossed thighs--numbering with mounting ecstasy the times she made abortive probes into the tortured flesh of her young and withered limb, smearing the black bruises with an effusion of supple scarlet droplets, searching for the blue, elusive vein. This acquaintance, mercifully desirous of relieving me of my long burden of melancholy, has invited me to visit her on Sunday, to give me an injection of the same illustrious opiate; but I have not yet decided whether or not the experience would prove edifying enough to justify the possible consequences, which are too familiar to suffer enumeration. For myself, I would be happy simply to watch her again, and to once again (as I did the first time) kiss the blood from the crinkle of her emaciated joint, tainted as it may be with some trace remnant of that diabolical ambrosia.

We are all, in our way, seeking Heaven--though the way that many of us pursue it--society, wealth, prestige, etc.--can inevitably only bind us more thoroughly to the muck of the earth. The beauty of the drug-fiend is that she, in her own faint and greatly befuddled capacity, understands that the ascension of the soul can only come at the expense of the body: that the body must atone for the soul's disconsolate captivity. The souls of a thousand eminent businessmen and doctors' wives are not worth the froth that rolls from the cracked lips of a single overdosed whore. Made as we are for suffering, those who have not sufficiently learned to suffer--or to desire suffering--in

life, must surely suffer all the more afterward. For every ounce of suffering that one avoids oneself must perforce be made the suffering of another. Thus we are only truly saved whose pursuit of Heaven leads us to the torments of the damned.

THE CONTEMPTIBLE URGE

How easily it is that we, the corpulent denizens of this ravenous land, reach for food in our idleness! Having passed the day setting down my scheme of starvation in writing, I thought that I would relax my thoughts in words other than my own, and sat down with the idea of turning the pages of a book until the time came for me to go to my job at the department store. While I find the feeling of an empty stomach strangely satisfying, like a hot little lead ball suspended at the pit of my person, the moment I took to my couch, it was my *hand* that yearned--no, expected--to find a morsel of something to reach for, and thus traveling to my mouth, lose itself in senseless mastication while my eyes digested the lines printed before me. Of course, earlier in the day, I had tucked away into discreet cabinets everything I possessed that could be ingested, down to the last vial of Tabasco sauce. But even as I attempted to fix my concentration upon the volume I had opened, a secondary mind came detached from the primary, and went roving about the room, gnashing out its frustration at having nothing to put into its mouth. I tried to appease this unwelcome imp by giving it a pipe full of tobacco to smoke, but it responded by puffing where before it had gnashed, and soon I was quite blinded by the improbable quantity of smoke it produced.

I want this child that is in me dead: this spoiled, unmanageable little cretin that forages with filthy hands for tidbits with which to mollify its ghoulish love of chewing. I say it so that I will believe it--that *I am not hungry*. I am starving, and that is different. I am starving because food no longer exists for me--because there is no nourishment worth seeking in this world--no delicacy worth the price of extending my stay here for a single hour. I am not hungry because I do not *want* food; what I am starved for, famished for, perishing for, is *purpose*--and that, only Death can bring me. The definition of a survivor is one who not only accepts the intolerable, but adopts himself to it--who masters the swine-trough by becoming a swine. This urge, then, to pass from one meal to the next, to reward myself for waking with breakfast, and for laboring with lunch, and for resting with supper, is the very enemy itself. I condemn a life lived on such gratuitously self-congratulatory terms. My failures will eat the person by whom they were engendered, and when he is dead, the worms will eat the rest. My final and singular success will be my failure to go on feeding the failure that I am.

TWO UNEQUAL BEAUTIES

Whenever I have applied serious consideration to the prospect of terminating my mortal existence, I have found myself perhaps inordinately (or perhaps not so inordinately) troubled by the question of what my sudden death would signify to my daughter, who is now ten years old, and in what unfortunate ways it may affect her as her own life continues. It is not that I believe myself to be a

fortunate presence in my daughter's life, or a good influence, or anything of that sort--because, of course, I am a destitute failure in every respect; it is only that I have difficulty tolerating the thought of her growing up to resent or disdain me even more after my death as a failure, than she would if I were to continue living as a failure into her maturity.

As regards my plan of starvation, the additional question arises of how I am to attend to my daughter's nourishment when she is with me, while continuously refusing to do anything about my own. I could say that I have already eaten, but as the day persists, this excuse will wear thin. I could tell her that I am ill, but then she would dote after me--but only so long as I could continue to make the dissemblance credible, because I am rarely ill. I could tell her that I have begun a special diet, but because I was already thin, she would want to know my reason for adopting it, and of what it consists, and why I am not partaking of those things. The dilemma only deepens when I am invited to join in the repasts of my brother and his brood, who occupy the upper portions of the house, or my sister, who lives nearby in the house that my former (second) wife and I bought together when we were married. Even though I have rid myself of nearly all society but that of my immediate family, it appears as if willful starvation shall be a hard thing to hide for very long. And after a week, if not sooner, the physical change in me will likely be noticeable in itself.

I suppose I must do my best with what ingenuity I have. However great my failures in life, at the end of this pilgrimage, my daughter will know that, indeed, I was

simply not meant for this world, and that I possessed--at least--the inner fortitude and integrity to take my own leave of it when my spirit could abide with no more depredation. I may be a puzzle to her for however long her own life persists, but my memory will stand as proof that the prerogative of survival is not insurmountable--that we are not obliged to live merely for the sake of living--that we may always make the choice between two unequal Beauties.

SKINNY GAMES

The twenty-fourth hour of my abstention passed in the company of K. and E., the former of whom has been introduced already as the user of heroin. They came in the earliest hours of the new day, from a tavern where they had been passing the evening in the company of friends; E. herself could scarcely be made to walk, and I had the pleasure of permitting her towering, cadaverous frame to lean upon me as I led them down to my basement hovel. Rather than forcing them to see the fullness of the disorder in which I live (for neither had visited me there before), I had perfunctorily prepared for their coming by lighting a profusion of candles and many sticks of incense, which gave what was visible of my hermitage something of the cast of a subterranean temple of Literature, over-strewn as it continuously is by a bedlam of books, arranged without reason in piles and stacks--as if a bibliographic Tower of Babel had been knocked down in the center of my living room.

Both girls found their way immediately and gratefully to a seat--I depositing E. in a soft armchair, into which her

body fell like so many loosely-hinged sections of bone, while K. sank onto my couch, and instantly busied herself in devouring handfuls of popcorn from a bag that she had carried in with her. As I returned from the kitchen sink with a glass of water for the liquor-drenched and drooping E., K. offered me to join in her amusing repast. I declined with a candid admission of my late resolve to henceforth eschew solid food, even to the point of death--as I knew that K. is not of the disposition that would find such a confession particularly strange or repugnant. In fact, she told me, she had attempted the same herself not long ago, but found that she could withstand no more than four days of it. I described for her my intention to keep daily record of my starvation, adding that I had made allusion to her already in one of my initial posts, upon which point she bade me good luck, while warning me of the discomfort that would await me as my fast proceeded.

The girls were already sleepy after their earlier celebrations, and the mood of the room, swaying with shadows and candlelight, and thick with the scent of incense, was entrancing and soporific. I drank what remained of my bottle of whiskey, and we conversed on such subjects as occurred to us, with E.'s speech especially betraying the extent of her drunkenness; as the hour slipped further toward morning, it seemed as if none of us knew fully whether we had been absorbed into a sort of shared dream, in which our words passed from our mouths as if another were speaking them, and were transformed upon the air into an unfamiliar but mystically cogent tongue. We traded kisses between us as children once traded marbles, in the days when children still played with each other. By this time, I too had paid

my farewell to perfect sobriety, and, with E. commanding such a minute area of the seat--and being of small breadth myself--I accepted a place beside her in the armchair. She passed her long arm over my shoulder, allowing her head to fall upon my breast, while I embarked upon a long discourse-- whispered into her ear, and of the oracular variety to which I am, at such times, often given--upon our absurdity as examples of humanity, and our mutual predestination for an unready grave.

When my soliloquy had ended, and we had all dozed for a while, and consoled each other with strokes and kisses, we all arose, and embraced, and I led them out again, this time giving my shoulder to K. I went to bed feeling quite at peace, and awoke late this morning without a trace of hunger, to pass the day in an easier mood than that to which I am accustomed.

Later, as my daughter played with her younger cousins, I related to my brother and sister-in-law my resolution to take what I described as a fast of significant length, over which they expressed great worry and incredulity. Since I had been so reluctant and infrequent an eater already, they failed to see how I was to benefit from mortifying myself even further--preferring that I stop drinking before I stop eating. I made shrift to explain that my insobriety is itself a form of pseudo-spiritual self-elevation, and that I hoped, through starvation, to elevate myself still further above quotidian consciousness.

Drinking a glass of water and watching the family take careless portions from a large supper, I felt, at last, the clawing fingers of real hunger, and was pleased.

Saturday, December 10, 2011

FROM JUBILEE TO LAMENTATION

Perhaps it is because I have passed the evening in the presence of my daughter, or because I am nearing the forty-eighth hour of my fast, that I feel now--with my pipe in my mouth and a glass of good brandy close-at-hand--a queer and unaccountable ebullience. It is nothing resembling joy or hope, of course: these are strangers to me even in my remotest memory. But this heretical defiance--this spectacle of contempt against life's most importunate instinct--is more delicious to me than anything the mouth could consume. It has become, for the moment, something like--if not actually amounting to--a purpose.

It is some manner of joke, however trivial, that the second time I have been invited to eat popcorn during my fast (the reader will recall my previous entry), it was by my daughter herself, for whom I made a bag while we sat together watching episodes of the 1950s *Sherlock Holmes* television show. Though she had made no inquiries earlier, when I sat through dinner without eating, she now showed alarm at my also declining the half of the bag that would normally be my portion. Seeing no value in dissimulating with her, I explained that I was subjecting myself to something of an experiment--to see how long I could go without allowing solid food pass my lips. Naturally she was anxious to know how long I expected that to be, and I told her regretfully that there was no way to predict--only that I would continue my "experiment"

for as long as I was physically able. I told her that there were many thousands of people starving in the world, and that I wanted to know what it felt like to be one of them; also, that I wanted to demonstrate to myself and those around me the way in which food is taken for granted in our society, even by those who refuse it in deference to that society's aesthetic ideals; also, that I was hoping for some manner of indescribable religious epiphany. Her verbatim response: "I knew you were crazy, Dad, but this is something else."

Not a minute later, the dear girl had set herself upon the task of finding a website which could tell her what the longest recorded fast had been, and what had become of its subject. Though I had intentionally avoided seeking such information myself--desiring my experience to be unaffected by my knowledge of anyone else's--I assisted her in discovering that one could survive fairly well without food for about three weeks, after which point the body begins consuming its own bone marrow, and so on. I gave my further assurance that I would eat something on Christmas, which was a mere fifteen days away (leaving unsaid my intention to eat almost nothing, and to resume my fast immediately the next day, so as to save myself--petty as it sounds--the horror of another year's arrival). This, however, was not sufficient for her, and she began to scribble reminders, which she posted in numerous unavoidable positions throughout the apartment, reading "Eat December 17th or hopefully before! PLEASE!" On these I made no comment, but simply kissed her, and listened to her eating her popcorn as we rejoined the exploits of Watson and Holmes. I thought, *it is as good to hear her eating as it would be to*

eat myself, and I remembered with what curiosity I had observed her in her fleshy, pink-robed infancy, picking bits of cereal up from the table before her and lifting them ritualistically up to her laughing mouth--her inconceivably tiny, ball-shaped hands working like machines in rebellion--besmearing her bright cheeks and her many-lined neck, and pounding the air in furious, gleeful exuberance. Nature, Nature, you mischievous, mercurial chit! Wherefore dost thou bear us from jubilee to lamentation?

Tomorrow I will bring my daughter to church, and I will take my communion with my eyes full of tears, and I will sit and be interviewed for another job, and I will decide, in K.'s basement, whether or not to try heroin, or to let heroin try me. O Christ! The emptiness of it all.

Sunday, December 11, 2011

THE PATRON SAINT OF PRETENTIOUS HALFWITS

There is no loneliness to compare to that of expectation, short of the loneliness that comes with the expectation of nothing. What excuse can I give for my loneliness? At twenty-nine years old, and some years younger by appearance, I am neither capable of blaming infirmity or disfigurement for my isolation. In society, I am not destitute of charm; I have an able enough wit--I am not utterly ignorant of culture, whether popular or civilized.

And yet I sit here friendless--having nothing but occasional acquaintances with whom to occasionally waste my time--having no familiar place to which I may retreat.

I sit and await an invitation to watch K. shoot drugs into her arm while drinking the insipid beer that her brother left behind upon his return to college. This anticipation--this meditating upon the whims of another--is the saddest part of loneliness, because it means that I have no society of my own: that I must content myself to obtrude upon the society of someone else.

And what is hunger, if not expectation--or starvation, if not the inconsolable expectation of nothing? When I was interned, as I have been on two occasions, in the mental health ward of the hospital, my day--like everybody else's--was made up of nothing but meals and the vacant interstices between meals--both of which were equally unsatisfactory. There was no conversation between inmates or roommates; nobody spoke except to complain aloud, or to utter a sigh of desolation or despondency. Now, in my frigid, makeshift burrow beneath the footsteps of my brother and his family, I am alone, without even a dinner to look toward--dreaming only of death, or of the further pursuit of death in strange and half-dead company.

I become drunk more easily now. After two glasses of brandy last night, my resolve nearly deserted me, and I went about opening my refrigerator and cabinets with the crazed idea of putting my stomach to rest--perhaps with some cheese or sardines--something inconsequential but soothing. Pouring a third glass, I grew fortunately too drunk to remember my hunger--too drunk to do anything but sleep. But I woke early this morning, sober, famished, in anguish--and went up to watch the rest of the family

take a breakfast of waffles, which they mopped over saccharine pools of maple syrup.

The quandary came upon me later, as I rose and stood and canted my way through the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, whether the acceptance of the blessed wafer would constitute a betrayal of my vow; but I concluded upon the assurance (though not arrived at by any study) that the saints, in their fasting, must have continued to take Communion, and found in it no concession or dishonesty. It is, after all, *spiritual* food--having been transformed by the mysteries of the sacrament into something no longer perfectly earthly. And yet I think, perhaps, that I chewed the papery morsel more slowly and swallowed it more reluctantly than I would have, were I not marking my third day without solid sustenance. The thought began to obsess me, of how magnificent it would be if I were a Catholic, and could take the Eucharistic sacrament every day, and--making that my only nourishment--pass slowly and gloriously into death with nothing but the body and blood of Christ in my stomach. And if God were pleased by this superhuman feat of piety, he might choose to preserve me forever, or for years and years, as evidence of my beatitude and grace!

END.

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